

**Paradise Lost and the Critique of Anthropocentrism:  
An Ecocritical Study of Selected Poems in Tanure Ojaide's  
*The Beauty I Have Seen: A Trilogy***

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**Abstract**

This article explores Tanure Ojaide's critique of the malevolent mortification of the biosphere by agents of imperialism which often results to paradise lost and ignites nostalgia in humans. This epoch is marred with the consequences of human actions on the planet's basic life support systems and these seemingly unbecoming practices ignite Ojaide's desire to contribute to environmental restoration by weaving a nature-oriented literature to redirect humankind from "ego-consciousness" to eco-consciousness. Consequently, this study adopts a content-based analysis of selected poems in *The Beauty I Have Seen: A Trilogy* through the deployment of ecocritical poetics to argue that the poems unequivocally critique man's uncanny activity on nature. Ecocriticism is seen as the intercourse between literature and ecology which centres on the investigation of human-nature connection and how such relationships endanger the natural environment with grave complications. Thus, this paper offers an ecocritical study of selected poems in the said collection to demonstrate the synergy between literature and ecology in investigating environmental issues so as to enlighten the society on the exigent need to preserve and conserve the ecosystem from further deterioration. This research therefore seeks to explore environmental issues such as deforestation (felling of forest trees), global warming, animal rights, water issues, climate change etc. and its attendant consequences on the ecosphere and all that exist therein, in order to expand eco discourse and tips environmental consciousness as the only pathway for a sustainable ecology.

**Keywords:** Paradise Lost, Anthropocentrism, Lamentation, Alienation, Nostalgia, Ecocriticism

## **Introduction**

In this contemporary epoch, humanity's opportunistic interconnection with the natural world is ceaselessly and precipitously smoldering ecological tragedies such that plants, animals and the environment become joint victims of this uncanny activity. The concepts paradise lost and anthropocentrism are closely knitted to the theory of ecocriticism and have become the "warning trope" to humanity on the dangers of ecological devastation and the looming doom that is ceaselessly unfolding. Therefore, Tanure Ojaide's collection, *The Beauty I Have Seen: A Trilogy* problematizes the ecological complexities that come with ecological devastation especially the killing of tree plants. The poet uses imagery of ecological destruction to accentuate the theme of chaos and disconnection with nature and by extension, disintegration (of Africans) from their progenitors. Thus, at a time when every living species – flora and fauna are endangered consequent upon man's callousness and sheer insensitivity to ecological ethics, Ojaide uses literature art to adequately portray and respond to the reality of his society through the lens of green studies or ecoliterature.

Tanure Ojaide is a writer, scholar and a critic par excellence who has over time proven to be an ardent environmentalist. He has illustrated this in a corpus of his literary oeuvres such as *Delta Blues & Home Songs*, *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* and *The Activist*, believing that the writer through his/her literary composition has the profound role of championing human and environmental cause. He affirms that "in a world in peril environmentally and ecologically, it is the writer's duty (as of the critic) to sensitize the public to be ecologically literate and work towards a balance relationship between human and non-human lives of the universe" (Ojaide, xi & xii). As such, the role of literature in investigating these current ecological crises cannot be undermined. Lending credence on this, Ojaruega (93) observes that Ojaide "is one writer who through his art has been able to bring to public attention the level of environmental degradation going on in the Niger Delta region for several decades." Since literature remains the mirror of the society, every literary work derives its strength and thematic thrust from the society. In other words, the society furnishes the writer with ample materials for literary representation.

Arguably, Ojaide's literary energy often centres on the representation of the pains and burdens of the oppressed or the dehumanised. A couple of his literary oeuvres express and validate the decolonisation project of the postcolonial African writers in order to inaugurate a kind of utopia to sustain the hope of the marginalised and the non-human species, especially in this era when neocolonialism or capitalist culture is robbing man of ecological wisdom. Thus, if no concerted effort is made to curb these ecological misdemeanors, certainly plants, animals and nature will persistently suffer the consequences. In this light, Nwagbara submits that "Ojaide uses literature for environmentalist purposes. He places premium on the biotic community - its sustainability and preservation.... Ojaide's writings have come to be considered environmentally conscious texts because they show serious connection with the natural

world as well as foreground how man's activities affect his environment and ecology" (18). Considerably, humankind is nothing but a cancer to the earth.

Ojaide's collection *The Beauty I Have Seen: A Trilogy* is narrative and descriptive in nature. A number of the poems therein express jeremiad mien which validate the poet-persona's inner feelings and observations about the society. The collection is divided into three sections. The first part captioned "The Beauty I Have Seen" contains twenty-six poems which present the poet-persona as a minstrel who generates his artistic inspiration from the muse. The muse blesses him with the voice and the lyric to entertain people. Most of the poems in this section are imbued with folktale and local colour generated from his nativity. They also indicate the minstrel's responsibility of writing, reeling history as well as speaking for the voiceless without fear. The second part subtitled "Doors of the Forest" made up of twenty-two poems which mostly focus on the writer's experience and observation of the social happenings around the globe. While the third part entitled "Flow and Other Poems" comprises of twenty-five poems. This part explores Ojaide's expedition around the globe, memory of ecstatic spots in the places he has visited and knowledge of leading figures in the world. On a surface reading of the collection, one may contemplate agreeing with Ojaruega's submission that:

Ojaide's writing is deeply steeped in Urhobo folklore, which his upbringing and later study and research in Udje have brought about ... to show the depth, breadth, and complexity of his themes and the sophistication of his art, all of which are infused with his native Urhobo folklore ... to the incorporation of folk songs and modelling of poems on the udje genre, ... he deploys folkloric resources as style and form to advance his themes (138).

However, close reading of a couple of the poems essentially indicate an elaborate investigation of the ways the imperialists - forest poachers, world's mining and oil industries have negatively affected the environment. Arguably, Ojaide's *The Beauty I Have Seen: A Trilogy* like *Delta Blues & Home Songs*, *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* and *The Activist* also traces the consequences of this "vicious ecological war" that has been waged on the bionetwork in the name of natural resource extraction.

### **Ecocriticism as Theoretical Framework**

Ecocriticism also known as green or environmental studies is an interdisciplinary theory grounded on the interplay between literature and ecology in examining environmental concerns. Particularly, it focuses on how nature/the earth is personified and portrayed in literary texts. Ontologically, Ecocriticism has its root in environmental movement of the late 1960s and 1970s (Dobie, 2012). In other words, Ecocriticism has its foundation on the awareness of ecological systems with keen focus on the myriad ways in which humankind interconnect with, depend upon and or exploit nature. It focuses on how literature explores the integral relation of people to

place and non-human life highlighting environmental ethics and sustainable energy. Although, William Ruekert is widely credited as the originator of the term Ecocriticism, other key ecocritics include: Cheryl Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, Lawrence Buell, Simon C. Estok, William Howarth, Joseph Meeker, Christopher Manes, Neil Evernden, David Mazel, Scott Slovic, Ursula K. Heise, Karen Thornber, Thomas Lyon, Sueellen Campbell, Michael P. Branch, Lawrence Coupe, Glen A. Love to mention but a few.

For Glotfelty, ecocriticism “is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii) while Abrams and Harpham (96) posit that ecocriticism “designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on the environment by human activities.” This implies that the focus of ecocritical theory revolves round the investigation of environmental devastation caused as a result of human activity on the natural world.

Similarly, Childs and Fowler (66) add that Ecocriticism is “the study of literary texts with reference to the interaction between human activity and the vast range of natural or non-human phenomena which bear upon human experience – encompassing (amongst many things) issues concerning fauna, flora, landscape, environment and weather.” As such, “the true concern of Ecocriticism ought not to be with obsolete representational models, but with how nature gets textualised in literary texts to create an ecoliterary discourse that would help produce an intertextual as well as an interactive approach between literary language and the language of nature” (Oppermann, 32) in order to push for a shift from vertical (opportunistic) to horizontal (symbiotic) relationship between humans and nature for mutual co-existence and continuity.

Furthermore, this suggests that ecocritics should shift their focus from mere representation of nature, but to also investigate all varying issues plaguing its existence to chart possible ways out of the crisis. Thus, ecocriticism or ecoliterature should be a practical step towards instilling environmental consciousness and eco-activism in humans. In the light of the above, Ecocriticism is a critical practice of analysing literature that would address the interconnections between human culture and the material world, involving both the human and the non-human. To this end, Ecocriticism is a conduit for renewing or stimulating the reader’s awareness of the non-human world and his/her responsibility to sustain it.

## **Ecocritical Archetypes and the Poet’s Lamentations for a Lost Paradise**

A handful of poems in *The Beauty I have Seen: A Trilogy* explore Ojaide’s exasperation and nostalgia for a primeval haven turned hell by imperialists or messengers of doom and death. The selected poems herein indicate his lamentation about a paradise lost. Poems such as “Doors of the Forest”, “I hoped to climb a ladder to the sky”, “Lamentations of the herbalist” and “To the Adivasis” vividly capture the

poet-persona's grief and lamentation about poaching and mortification of the forest called "treedom" by fellow humans who pride themselves in depleting and butchering this natural vegetation to satisfy their economic and capitalist desires at the detriment of all that co-inhabit the ecosphere.

The opening line of the poem "Doors of the Forest" is a warning and also an apt depiction of the aftermath of logging enterprise. In the poem, the poet-persona laments that: The bush was a countryside fair of a thousand voices/ that rang from pre-dawn through the wakeful hours. The forest was a home for numerous birds of the air that often herald a new dawn with their sonorous voices that keep the place lively. However, this lively and peaceful ambience has been replaced with dead and woodless silence. The loggers have chopped off the trees leaving the land naked as hot air set in and smolders the environment. He puts it thus:

The doors are now closed to the population of treedom  
after the holocaust of millennial axes and cutlasses;  
a vast dune is the brown seat of the imperial desert  
with hot air conducting the triumphant trumpet  
of victors.

The above lines indicate that the poachers have invented modern axes and cutlasses (sawing machine) and used them to fell the forest trees recklessly with no regards to its implication on the environment as this further paves way for hot air to transport diseases from around the globe which plague both flora and fauna. The speaker laments the loss of natural heritage (the treedom) – the iroko, mahogany and obeche that used to be the habitation for wildlife as well as protect the soil from erosion, desertification, drought and global warming. The speaker further laments:

With the forest gone, the bloodbath hushed over by rites  
of sprinkling confetti at wraiths of a once proud stock;  
the doors themselves fuelled the delirium of seasonal  
fires. Once the doors of the forest closed, came a new  
millennium of woodless silence - a gaping wound in the  
earth's chest thrives with worldwide denial of rain to  
douse the flames.

Evidently, the richness of this vegetation only exists in the people's memory. The destruction of the forest is a declaration of ecological war on all species that inhabit the ecology. As poachers and loggers mined the forest and laid bare the land, myriad of ecological issues surface and degenerate into what Nixon calls "slow violence". For Nixon, slow violence "is a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.... Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes" (2). Evidently, tree felling has gradual and everlasting effect on the ecosphere. Therefore, "The future of the earth depends on man and

consumption choices he makes for himself” (Usman, 103). As such, there is exigent need to caution humanity against these heinous activities to avert calamitous end of the ecosphere and its occupants.

In the poem titled “I hoped to climb a ladder to the sky”, Ojaide alludes to the biblical creation story in order to remind the reader that the earth and the vegetations precede every human tribe as recorded in Gen 1:10-12 thus: “And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called Sea ... and commanded the earth and it brought forth grass, herbs, trees, birds of the air and the waters to bring forth sea creatures.” This allusion is confirming that the trees and the birds are the early creations “before the womb that bore us broke its concealed sac” and humankind is a later creation of God. At first, the poet-persona celebrates the abundance and sublimity of this pied nature or the lush forest, however, his mood changed to lamentation as he reminisces over the loss of nature’s deluxe. He further bemoans the spirit that possesses humanity resulting to the reckless felling of the vegetation for selfish reasons. He posits that “nobody knew where the spirit came from to possess all”, hence, the disharmony or loss of the primeval relationship between humanity and the flora as well as the fauna. This, by extension results to the influx of ecological tragedies. He posits that:

The same way we embarked upon a ritual hunt to ferret  
out every life in water, air, and on the soil to pamper  
appetites that turns into voracious monster after we  
became strong. Roaring, the desert advances to take over  
our refuge; the hot winds landing countless battalions of  
sand regiments to swamp crowds of people now captives  
to inhuman habits.

These lines aptly capture the implications of man’s inhumanity to the natural environment as man becomes the victim of his misdeeds. The poet-persona goes further to validate his eco-poetics and lamentation thus:

We did not only disfigure the forest but flared its seeds,  
not only knocked out birds with catapults but poisoned  
the air; we cleared the land of what gave us life with  
their lives.

This poem recapitulates the damage done on the ecology in that the richness of the vegetation only exists in the people’s memory as a lamentation for a lost paradise. Thus, Ojaide “frequently use memory (both personal and collective) to draw trajectories between the past and the present. These manifest in the themes and techniques” (Orhero, 122).

Also, “Lamentations of the herbalist” succinctly captures Ojaide’s feelings about the absence of the tree endowment and its therapeutic essence to the Africans especially the herbalists. For the Africans, forest trees do not only provide good vegetations and habitation, but also provide man with medications to heal all forms of diseases. In a jeremiad manner, the speaker in the first stanza illustrates that:

The big-hearted forest once provided all my needs,  
nursed the herbs with which I performed miracles.  
Its evergreen coat stripped by hands of poachers,  
arsonists and cavalry of prospectors tearing down  
trees and trampling the lush carpets of undergrowths.

Here, the speaker decries the absence of the trees he often used in the past to cure all forms of ailments. Poachers, arsonists have torn down this rich vegetation and only a ghost of the host of population that once thrived there is seen. Evidently, the speaker expresses grief on this ecological imperialism and adds that:

My dew-wet stretch of goat path is torn open into  
a highway for tankers to take oil to inland ports.  
I now languish in a desolate land without a name,  
robbed of green and its potency, and now my hands  
cannot infuse health onto multiplying crowds of patients.

Suggestive that oil extraction in the speaker's domain has brought no progress but desolation and ululation to the inhabitants. His kinsmen have been robbed of the green vegetation and its lush healing effect on humanity. He rhetorically asks:

How do I wash away the taints that condemn the sick?  
How sharpen the vision of blurred eyes without herbs?  
How relieve harrowing headaches of tortured ones?

Given this paradise loss and absence of undergrowths, the persona laments that he has equally lost the knowledge of healing the sick or bestowing health to the needy, because the primeval ointments of the land have been cast away by the voracious poachers and imperialists. And this further creates a chasm between him and his ancestors who used to show him the tree plants and how to cure the sick. He no longer pays tribute to the forest keepers (the ancestors) or the healing gods, but now "sing this sad song" as a dirge for the butchered tree plants that once thrived in his domain. Therefore, "As human beings we have a need for place, where we can be connected to a community of people, plants, animals, and the land. Without this, we feel lost, alone, and alienated" (Routray, 315) hence the persona's lamentation.

Furthermore, Ojaide expands his environmental maxim beyond the shores of the coastal Niger Delta (Nigeria) to also capture the ecological devastation in other Third World countries such as India. For instance, in "To the Adivasis", he contends that:

The forest was the perennial provider of foods  
with special fruits of plants only that soil knew.

The caves offered solace from tantrums of sun and rain.

However, the imperialists have despoiled these natural endowments and the primeval peaceful lifestyle of old: Caterpillars bulldozed serene hills standing majestically, they inflicted gaping wounds upon the earth. And hacked the earth to death. By and large, the destruction of the land, hills, the caves and the shrines by these invaders is a ploy to legitimise colonial business in the Third World countries. In

other words, the destruction of their shrines is a scheme to cut them off their ancestors. He puts it thus:

Then came the explosion of the hills and they lost  
the shrines and paintings of their ancestors;  
the forests were shamefully stripped naked  
and they lost their Providence's kind hands.

Considerably, the so-called civilisation introduced by the West contradicts the native's philosophy of life. Consequently, the locals step up plans to defend their God-given wealth from exploitation. They choose to die as heroes than live in shame as cowards:

Trucks crushed children, men and women  
stopping their fortune from being stolen.  
Police and soldiers guarded the looters  
and shot at the adivasis standing for their rights-  
they chose to die rather than see their wealth  
they knew was god-given stolen from them;  
they stood with their bare bodies as shield  
but the poachers had no shred of conscience.  
The strangers killed sons and husbands  
and funeral pyres blazed day and night.  
The brave stood in their homes and lands  
and fell rather than live in further shame

In this light, the writer tips eco-activism as the only way to defend their god-given environment from poachers and land grabbers. This is in tune with the general submission that land is a central issue to Africans such that any attempt to confiscate or dislodge them from it usually aggravates counter-conflict - as in the case of Mau Mau in Kenya, militants in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. These guerilla fighters often risk their lives in its defense. Thus, this "green movement grew out of local efforts to resist environmental damage...posed by globally powerful institutions such as multinational corporations...whose operation reach every city, village, field and forest worldwide" (Shiva, 147).

To a larger extent, Ojaide submits that the only way to reclaim their land and to save their lives and environment from further mortification is via eco-activism. He declares that "We will continue to fight to hand over the land, waters, and air of our birth to our children in a livable state" (*The Activist* 216 & 217) and that: The children of tiger will in the end/ reclaim their blood spilt over their homes.

Also, "I Sing Out Of Sickness" expresses Ojaide's environmentalist aesthetics. He posits that "We have to douse the fires that threaten our very existence" (*The Activist* 269), hence it is not time to be mute or blind to the reality of dehumanisation and ecological depredation prevalent in the society. In the poem, Ojaide's tone shifts from lamentation to protest as a precursor to disentangle the Niger Delta ecology and his folks from continuous exploitation. The poem is a response to Ebi's question:



“What makes you write?” He clearly states that he is sick from the silence of his kinsfolk who are suffering under the weight of neocolonialism yet cannot complain or agitate. He is:

sick from the blindness of people from under whom  
lords tap their wealth and insult them for the misery that  
breaks the heart. I am mad at the harrowing hunger  
churning at them and cannot go on watching and doing  
nothing ....

This poem illustrates Ojaide’s concern about the artificial impoverishment of his people and his anguish with people who have chosen to be dumb and numb in the face of marginalisation and oppression and have accepted to die in silence. To further accentuate his lamentation for the lost paradise, he adds that:

And I throw up at the nauseating body that has become  
my land, the once primeval beauty splotted and  
scarred; I throw up because I am thirsty in the midst of  
streams that flow back pus from poisoned veins now  
varicose, dying from sunstroke in the rainforest once a  
divine canopy now beheaded by poachers out to choke  
insatiable sawmills.

Therefore, the poem is an expression of the speaker’s sad song about the multiple afflictions meted on his folks as well as the ecology. Lending voice on “I Sing Out of Sickness”, Irantiola asserts that the “issues raised in the poem include: armed robbery, suffering in silence, the exploration of the resident mineral resources whereas the owners and residents of that community are still impoverished, the extra-judicial killings of people who are complaining of their misery. Other issues include water pollution, deforestation, extortion by the police force...” (10). Ojaide then incites his people to rise up and defend themselves from the monster that is killing them and their ecology. Undoubtedly, it is pertinent to sustain the planet earth or perish alongside. Chinmayee corroborates that “The revival of nature needs a collective effort from the citizens of the world. As citizens of the world, we need to act upon the situation and not be indifferent” because “damage to nature consistently gets us closer to doomsday” (69 & 70).

Similarly, “I No Go Sidon Look” is an affirmation of Ojaide’s maxim that arts should be used to foster human cause and institute justice for the oppressed. “I No Go Sidon Look” in pidgin English, literally means “I will not sit down and look”. He (Ojaide) will not fold his arms and watch the injustices meted on the marginalised majority and the ecology, but would rather take action to disentangle his kinsfolk from all forms of oppression. Like his protagonist in *The Activist*, he will swing to action to fight against Shell oil companies and their cohorts who are polluting the water, air or the entire Niger Delta ecology. He posits that:

I no go sidon look make Shell dey piss  
and shit for our water

...  
I no go sidon look  
make anybody curse Mama wen born me

...  
I no fit sidon look lailai  
I go do something-o.

The “Mama” in the extract above personifies “Mother Earth” that gave birth and nurtures him into being, as such, he will not fold his arms and watch while invaders abuse, curse or hack her to death. Thus, “There were so many new causes that needed to be addressed to make the world a better and safer place to live” (*The Activist*, 25). Altogether, “I No Go Sidon Look” demonstrates the poet-persona’s eco intention to purge out these imperial oil companies and forest poachers. Thus, deeply rooted in his “environmentalist discourse is a concern for urgent action to be taken to mitigate against the destructive effects of humans on the environment before it becomes unfit for human habitation” (Tulloch, 111), because, human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Therefore, the only way for lasting change is a shift in global consciousness to alter capitalist (resource) consumption culture that prompts human exploitation of nature; felling of tree plants, burning of fuel fossils etc (Dauvergne, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

The selected poems demonstrate Ojaide’s lamentation of the transmogrification from utopia to dystopia as a result of man’s parasitic interaction with the ecology. In a jeremiad manner, he points at the impending doom that is lurking to befall the earth. Therefore, the poet is not only a writer and critic but also a prophet, who prophesies to alert the reader and the society on the unfolding situations in order to adjust in line with the contemporary realities. In other words, there is exigent need to caution against environmental devastation and uncanny depletion of the rich natural endowments such as crude oil, tin and forest trees to avert a calamitous end. Altogether, Ojaide laments the environmental collapse threatening the Nigerian landscape and the globe at large and demonstrates that the increasing level of ecological depredation by forest poachers, world’s mining and oil industries are unsustainable. This is because the enormous expansions of mineral exploitation come at the expense of destruction of livelihoods – flora and fauna in many communities. Hence, he deploys metaphor of paradise lost in his poetry not only to lament but to also negate the destructive forces of global economic expansions that characterise the twenty-first Century. In conclusion, this study submits that the selected poems in Ojaide’s collection, *The Beauty I Have Seen: A Trilogy* are nature-oriented literature that redirects humanity from “ego-consciousness” to eco-consciousness as the potential for a sustainable ecology.

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